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SUBJECT: AMITY PRINTING PRESS -- CHINA'S BIBLE PUBLISHER

REF: 2004 SHANGHAI 3118

CLASSIFIED BY: Kenneth Jarrett, Consul General, US Consulate,
Shanghai.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (SBU) Summary: During the Consul General's November 20 visit to Amity Printing Press in Nanjing, Special Assistant to General Manager Peter Dean said they did not have any substantive problems printing Bibles in China. Amity Printing Press produces all Bibles sold in officially-approved Protestant Churches in China. Amity is a joint venture company owned by the UK-based United Bible Societies and the Amity Foundation, a non-profit organization connected to the Chinese Christian Council/Three-Self Patriotic Movement (CCC/TSPM). According to the printing press's statistics, Amity has already produced 3 million Bibles in the first half of this year, 1 million of which were for export. Exports make up 21 percent of the factory's output. The printing press is building a new factory that will have the capacity to print approximately 12 million Bibles per year. Dean said, however, that he did not anticipate a significant increase in the number of Bibles printed each year. According to Amity Foundation Associate General Manager Zhang Liwei, Amity was currently focused on capacity building and trying to generate more funding from domestic rather than foreign donations. The foundation's work centers on education, health and rural development. End Summary.

Printing Press's History

12. (SBU) The Consul General and Poloff toured Amity Printing Press and received a briefing from Special Assistant to the General Manager Peter Dean on November 20. Amity Foundation Associate General Secretary Zhang Liwei also attended the briefing. The printing press, located in a suburb of Nanjing, prints all Bibles sold in China's officially-sanctioned Protestant churches. It produces Bibles in traditional and simplified Chinese, Chinese-English, ethnic minority languages, and Braille. It also printed other religious publications and foreign language Bibles for export.

¶3. (SBU) According to Dean, Chinese printing presses began printing Bibles shortly after the Chinese government allowed religious practice in 1979. One of the biggest problems faced by these presses was obtaining the high-quality thin paper needed to print Bibles. In the early 1980's, UBS became involved with some of these presses and began supplying paper from Finland and the United Kingdom. As UBS became more familiar with the situation, the need for a high-speed modern printing plant in China became clear. In 1987, UBS representatives met with Chinese Christian leaders and signed an agreement with Amity Foundation to establish the printing press. UBS covered the costs of building the factory and the local government, eager for more jobs, provided the land.

¶4. (SBU) Dean noted that while both Amity Foundation and UBS were non-profits, the printing press was registered as a joint venture and paid taxes on its profits. The factory currently employed 320 people, 140 of which worked in specialty areas. UBS continued to provide funds for the factory to purchase the paper to print the Bibles. Because the printing press did not have to pay for imported paper, it was able to keep down the price of Bibles. A typical Amity Bible cost 12 RMB (1.5 USD). He did provide information on the price of the Bibles that were printed for export.

Production Numbers

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¶5. (SBU) Dean said that between 1987 and January 2006, the factory had produced 50.3 million Bibles. From January to July 2006, it had already produced three million Bibles, two million of which were for the China market and one million for export. Dean provided a chart to CG and Poloff which showed the number of Bibles produced by the factory every year. According to the chart, the number of Bibles printed increased significantly in the period, 2003-2006. From 1994-2002, the factory produced approximately 2.4 to 3 million Bibles per year. In 2003, the factory produced 4.2 million Bibles. In 2004 and 2005, the factory produced 5.4 and 6.4 million Bibles respectively.

¶6. (SBU) Dean downplayed the increase and said the factory increased production simply because it had cut down on production in the mid-nineties and stock levels were low. He said the only indicative trend he saw was that the demand for pocket-size Bibles had surpassed the demand for larger Bibles. Since the print for pocket-size Bibles was small, they were purchased primarily by young people. The increase in sales could be seen as an indication that there were more young people interested in the Bible.

Bible Distribution

17. (SBU) According to Dean, the factory made its decision on how many Bibles and religious texts to produce based on the number of orders it received from the CCC/TSPM and overseas clients. The factory was not involved in deciding what type of Bibles to print. This decision was made by CCC/TSPM in consultations with UBS. For example, a group was revising the Chinese-language version of the Bible and would submit the revised version to both UBS and CCC/TSPM for approval. Dean said that the group was merely revising the language to make it more contemporary and there were no theological changes.

18. (SBU) In addition to deciding what type of Bible to publish, Dean added that CCC/TSPM also decided how many Bibles were needed every year as it controlled Bible distribution in China. The factory was involved in so far that it was responsible for delivering the Bibles and other religious texts to the distribution points. There were 70 main distribution points in China that dispersed Bibles to 55,000 churches and meeting points. To improve distribution, CCC/TSPM also had 44 Bible distribution vans that transported Bibles from the distribution points to churches. In order to distribute material, CCC/TSPM applied for a permit each year that specified how many Bibles and other religious materials it would distribute in the upcoming year. It held a meeting every year with representatives from the distribution points to come up with this information. Dean said that this should not be seen as an attempt by the Chinese government to control the number of Bibles. Rather, he said it was a normal bureaucratic measure that applied to any organization that wanted to distribute reading material. He said that since he had been in China, CCC/TSPM twice had realized that it needed to distribute more Bibles than had been specified in its permit. Both times it applied for a new permit and received permission to distribute more Bibles.

19. (C) Dean offered no particular insights when asked why Chinese authorities limited Bible distribution to authorized churches and did not, for example, allow bookstores to sell the Bible. He said it was inevitable that Bibles would eventually be commercially available, and heard that this might occur soon. Reinforcing his point, he provided a copy of a 2003 publication called "The Words of Jesus" that consisted solely of excerpts from the Bible. This publication was available at bookstores.

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Exporting Bibles

10. (SBU) The factory produced Bibles and other religious materials in several different foreign languages including German, South African, and Spanish for export. According to Dean, from January 2003 until July 2006, 21 percent of the factory's production was exported. Of the materials exported, 36 percent went to Africa, 26 percent went to Europe, 11 percent went to Latin America, and 27 percent went to other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Dean expected exports to increase after the printing press moved to its new facilities.

Expansion Plans

¶11. (SBU) According to Dean, the printing press was currently building a new factory that would be twice the size of the current one. Construction had already begun and Dean hoped that the company would be able to move into the new facility in 2007.

The new factory would have the capacity to print 12 million Bibles annually. Dean said, however, that there were no plans to significantly increase production. Printing press leaders just wanted to have the extra capacity in case it was needed in the future. Dean said, 10 years ago, there was a deliberate effort to add new equipment and create a second production line.

This was needed in case the first production line went down. Dean said company management had decided to move after the land on which the current factory stood was re-zoned into a residential area. While the printing press could have remained for another 10 years, management saw the writing on the wall. If they waited 10 years, then they would end up located even further from Nanjing, which would make it difficult to retain their workforce.

Amity Foundation Update

¶12. (SBU) On the margins of the tour, Poloff spoke to Amity Foundation Associate General Secretary Zhang Liwei about the organization's operations. Amity Foundation is a volunteer organization connected to the CCC/TSPM. According to its website, it implemented programs in areas of need within China, specifically in the fields of education, health, and rural development. Zhang said the Amity Foundation currently had no plans to expand programs and was focused on capacity building and staff development. The foundation had recently lost a number of key personnel, many of whom left to find higher-paying jobs and was now recruiting and training new personnel.

¶13. (SBU) Zhang also noted that Amity Foundation was also concentrating on increasing domestic contributions. Only a small percentage of its budget came from the printing press and most of the budget came from overseas contributions. This was not sustainable and Amity needed to increase domestic contributions. Zhang oversaw Amity Foundation's public relations department and was responsible for increasing contributions. He said he was finding his job to be very difficult and noted that many people in China did not see the value in making charitable contributions and were only concerned about making money.

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